

The Accidental Project Manager

A Web-Published Article by Michael Greer

Introduction

This article is intended for a particular kind of project management (PM) newcomer... someone I call ***the accidental project manager***. It is intended to provide these folks with encouragement and hope!

Are you an accidental project manager?

Here are some tell-tale signs:

- Primarily because of your competence in your technical specialty or your profession, you suddenly find yourself responsible for managing a project for your organization. (Maybe you didn't duck fast enough when they were choosing a team leader... or maybe you have informally demonstrated leadership without having the formal job title of leader or manager and they decided it was time to "put you in charge.")
- You know your profession and you have a pretty good idea of the kinds of results (i.e., the finished product or customer impact) you want your project to achieve.
- While you're not really sure if you want to manage the project, you have a strong sense of professional pride and you know you would like your project to achieve quality results (as defined by your profession), on-time, and within budget.
- You will probably be serving as project manager or team leader at the same time you are making your own contribution to the project as a specialist in your field (in other words, you may be managing the project on a part-time basis).
- You have had little or no formal training in PM.
- You are somewhat suspicious that maybe "all that formal project management stuff" is maybe overkill and might just be a bunch of joyless "administrivia" that will stifle the creativity of your team.
- Still, you have a feeling some PM discipline will probably be useful to your project, but you're not quite sure how much or what form it should take.
- You are certain you have no need to learn all the sophisticated management techniques that a project manager would need to manage a billion-dollar construction project or to land a space craft on Mars.
- You are looking for practical, no-nonsense tools and techniques that will help you do "just enough" PM to keep things running smoothly -- and no more!
- For now, at least, you are certain that you aren't interested in pursuing project manager certification from asapm, PMI, PRINCE2, or any other certifying body. Instead, you see the evolution of your career in terms of acquiring broader and deeper knowledge of your chosen specialty.

OK. You're an accidental project manager. Is there hope for you?

If most of the above statements seem to apply to you, then you are most likely an accidental project manager. And I'd like to assure you that it's okay for your eyes to glaze over and your jaws to stifle a silent yawn when you are in the presence of people who are discussing the finer points of one or another PM certification test. After all, what revs up your engine is the latest and greatest technical innovation in your specialty! So it's perfectly reasonable to wish that the PM gurus would "get to the point, already!"

To understand where the accidental project manager fits within the field of PM, it is useful to step outside the PM realm and consider, by way of analogy, the field of medicine. In the medical field, as in PM, there are all sorts of skill-levels required of its various practitioners. For example, medical researchers seek cures and develop clinical protocols (i.e., medical "best practices") which are implemented by highly-trained surgeons, specialists, and family doctors. Emergency medical technicians make critical interventions applying these clinical protocols in order to keep people alive long enough to turn them over to the care of these more highly-trained specialists. At the same time, in small towns and rural communities all over the world, volunteer fire fighters and other local first responders apply emergency first aid to accident victims in the form of CPR and other easily-trainable medical procedures. And finally, parents, coaches, and scout leaders apply similar first aid to the minor wounds and medical emergencies suffered by their kids.

The point is, you don't need to be trained in the subtleties of cell physiology or cardio-pulmonary surgery to perform CPR and save a life. You just need to have the right tool or procedure and the confidence to apply it. And the same is true for you, the accidental project manager. You need not be able to recite all possible PM definitions and terms to achieve great results in your role as project leader or part-time project manager. Let your joy and professional satisfaction come from applying ***just enough PM*** to help your team achieve high-quality results from projects in your specialty.

In my [PM Basics workshops](#) I spend a lot of time working with accidental project managers. The vast majority of these folks are highly effective in their specialties -- otherwise, their senior management wouldn't be investing in developing their PM skills. Unfortunately, these PM novices often find themselves intimidated by the concepts, structures, and field-specific terminology associated with the PM profession. If you are feeling this way, I urge you to relax and remember the many roles played in the medical profession. More to the point, remember the volunteer fire fighter or scout leader. In times of emergency, these people make invaluable contributions at the entry levels of the medical field -- indeed, they save lives! Yet they certainly don't expect themselves to know everything the doctors know. Instead, they focus their efforts on learning exactly the right basic medical procedures to get immediate, high-quality results. Are they ashamed because they don't have the depth of knowledge as the medical researcher or surgeon? Certainly not! In their "real professions" they may be lawyers, accountants, computer techs, or whatever... and they could undoubtedly teach medical experts a thing or two about these specialties.

So welcome, accidental project manager, to the sometimes complex, sometimes helpful, sometimes overblown world of formal PM. ***As you wander through the PM world, give yourself permission to be lost, even confused. And give yourself permission to pick and choose the kinds of things that will help you manage your projects more effectively. Above all, use your common sense and your in-depth knowledge of your primary specialty, to help you reject the PM stuff that you know won't help your projects.*** After all, most of PM's best practices are rooted in common sense; they are the simple practices of experienced people, wrapped up in sometimes high-sounding terms. And the good news is that because PM is rooted in common sense, it is fairly easy to learn.

Finally, ***remember the Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz?*** More than anything else, he wanted to have a brain... he wanted to be brilliant. But by simply testing himself in the quest to save Dorothy, he discovered he already had all the wisdom he needed. He only had to reach inside himself and apply it. ***He didn't really need the Wizard to validate this wisdom. Nor do you need the great and powerful PM professionals to validate your inherent wisdom.*** You merely need to find some PM tools and procedures that seem useful, decipher them, filter them through your professional experiences, and put them to work for your project team. Informed by your inherent wisdom, you will most likely achieve excellent results.

Do you like this article? The latest edition of ***The Project Manager's Partner: A Step-by-Step Guide to Project Management*** contains 57 tools, checklists, and guidelines to help project managers. For more information, click on the link above or phone [HRD Press](http://www.hrdpress.com) at (800) 822-2801.

Would you like a ***custom-tailored, on-site PM workshop*** for your organization? [Click here to check out the possibilities](#) or send an e-mail to greers_pm@yahoo.com.

(C) Copyright 2009 from **Michael Greer's Project Management Resources** web site. The URL is <http://www.michaelgreer.com>. For more information, send e-mail to greers_pm@yahoo.com.
-- Feel free to copy and distribute for informational (not-for-profit) purposes.